

LESSON 7: ROLES IN GROUP COMMUNICATION



INTRODUCTION

At some point in your life, you have probably heard the saying, “You can either be a leader or a follower.” This statement might lead you to believe that there are just two possible roles you can assume within a group, when, in fact, there are a number of potential roles that you might play at any given time. Leadership is actually the combination of a variety of roles within a group that moves the group toward its goals.

Roles are the characteristic and expected social behavior of an individual within a group. We all have unique skills, strengths, and talents which, when contributed to the group, enable the group to operate effectively and be successful. When we communicate with one another in a group situation, we assume certain roles based on these unique skills, strengths, and talents. Some of these roles enable us to complete tasks, while others build and strengthen the group. Still others are destructive or harmful to the group communication process.

THE ROLES WE PLAY

Within any group, roles will naturally evolve during the group formation process, and may change over time. Group dynamics and

communication can either be accelerated or hindered based on the roles we assume.

Though many different roles exist, they fall into three major categories.

- **Task Roles** are those roles that help the group accomplish a specific task.
- **Social Roles** are those roles that help the group maintain itself as a group.
- **Dysfunctional Roles** are those roles, which are destructive and block group communication.

TASK ROLES

In order to accomplish a goal and achieve results, members of the group must take on task-oriented roles that will fit in with the objectives of the group as a whole. For example, if your group were responsible for putting on a fundraiser to raise money for a school trip, you might need people to suggest ideas, and gather information. You would also need someone to plan the event, and someone to coordinate it. These are all task roles. A description of some of the task roles is listed below (this is not an exhaustive list):

- **Initiator** — suggests new ideas and proposes solutions
- **Opinion Seeker** — looks for options; seeks ideas and suggestions from others
- **Coordinator** — organizes the various activities of team members and shows relationships between ideas
- **Energizer** — stimulates the group to a higher level of activity
- **Recorder/Secretary** — keeps a record of group actions
- **Information Giver** — offers facts or generalizations to the group
- **Information Seeker** — asks for information about the task; seeks data

- Evaluator — measures decisions against group goals
- Spokesperson — speaks on behalf of the group
- Planner — prepares timelines, schedules, and organizes group logistics

SOCIAL ROLES

In order to maintain the group as a unit, it is also necessary that some people assume social roles to promote social interaction and a healthy group dynamic. These roles are less concerned with the task at hand, and more concerned with team growth and cohesiveness. Some social roles are described below:

- Encourager — praises the ideas of others; warmly receptive to other points of view and contributions
- Volunteer — offers whatever is needed
- Group Observer — keeps records of group activities and uses this information to offer feedback to the group
- Compromiser — moves the group to another position that is favored by all group members by coming “half way”
- Gatekeeper — Keeps communication channels open by encouraging or facilitating the participation of others or by proposing regulation of the flow of communication
- Standard Setter — suggests standards or criteria for the group to achieve. Standards may apply to the quality of the group process or limitations on acceptable individual behavior within the group.
- Summarizer — raises questions about the direction which the group discussion is taking by summarizing what has been discussed and showing where it deviates from group objectives
- Reality Tester — subjects group accomplishments to a set of standards for the group. This role examines the “practicality,” or the “logic” behind a suggestion of group discussion.
- Mediator — mediates the differences between group members. Attempts to reconcile disagreements, and relieves tension in conflict situations

DYSFUNCTIONAL ROLES

When an individual has competing needs or a personal agenda that is not in harmony with that of the group, the result will often be one of frustration. This frustration frequently manifests itself through behaviors that block effective group communication. Some examples of dysfunctional roles are described below:

- Aggressor — attacks other group members, deflates the status of others and shows aggressive behaviors
- Blocker — resists movement by the group
- Recognition seeker — calls attention to him or herself
- Self confessor — seeks to disclose non-group related feelings or opinions
- Dominator — asserts control over the group by manipulating other group members
- Help seeker — tries to gain the sympathy of the group
- Non-participator — chooses not to participate in group discussions

You need to be careful when labeling dysfunctional roles, because these behaviors may be subject to interpretation. You may see a particular group member as a “blocker,” when they in fact see themselves as a “reality tester.” It is important to be aware of the lens through which you view the behavior of others.

WHICH ROLE WILL YOU CHOOSE?

The role a person plays largely depends on his or her personality, preferences and abilities. Some roles will come more naturally than others, and you may fill more than one role at the same time. For example, you could be an ‘Opinion Seeker’ and an ‘Encourager’ at the same time. In other cases, you may also share roles with others members of the group.

Within group communications, the qualities that members bring to a group affect their ability to accept influence uncritically, increase cohesiveness, mediate conflicts, and solve problems. These characteristics are another important dimension that affect the roles we play within a group. Our credibility and our attitudes can influence our behaviors, and the way others perceive us.

Likewise, a personality trait is a tendency to behave in a consistent way in different situations. These traits are also important in determining our role in group communications. We can classify the numerous personality traits into six broad categories. They appear in some combination in each of us; however, your predominant trait will influence how you interact within a group.

- *Authoritarianism.* An **authoritarian** person thinks that there should be status and power differences between people. As group members, these people use their power when in a position of leadership. They are firm, demanding, directive, and not likely to accept the ideas of others.
- *Social Sensitivity.* This trait, also known as empathy, is an understanding of the feelings of others. It shows a person’s ability to look at what is happening from the perspective of the other person.
- *Superior Tendencies.* Group members who possess high **ascendant** tendencies tend to assert themselves and exert dominance over

others. These group members influence group decisions; however, they tend to make remarks that build themselves up at the expense of others and display stern behavior that works against success in dealing with others.

- *Self-reliance and Dependability.* Group members who show these traits demonstrate a sense of responsibility. They possess such characteristics as integrity, self-esteem, self-reliance, and self-control. They are successful in helping the group to accomplish its goals. People with high self-esteem tend to resist influence attempts and threats made by others; whereas, people with low self-esteem tend to be influenced by someone who has higher self-esteem.
- *Unconventionality.* Unconventional group members do not behave in expected ways. They do not seem to be interested in the group’s objectives, and their behavior keeps the group from its work.
- *Emotional Stability.* Anxiety and adjustment are two widely studied indicators of emotional stability. An anxious group member will worry about some uncertain or future event although there is no apparent cause for his or her worry. On the other hand, if an individual is well adjusted, relating well to his or her environment, that person appears to have emotional control and stability. Adjustment is positively related to group effectiveness, motivation, development of cohesiveness, and high morale.

CONCLUSION

The spectrum of roles within the group communication process is much richer than just ‘leaders’ and ‘followers’. By increasing our awareness of the diversity of those with whom we interact, and stretching our own capacities, we can develop the skills to communicate effectively and productively within a group.